

Book Review: Life After New Media: Mediation as a Vital Process

Blog Admin

In *Life after New Media*, **Sarah Kember** and **Joanna Zylinska** make a case for a significant shift in our understanding of new media. They argue that we should move beyond our fascination with objects such as smart phones to an examination of the interlocking technical, social, and biological processes of mediation. **Kim Toffoletti** believes this ambitious project succeeds in convincing us to think differently about new media, and makes a key intervention into the fields of technology and media studies, by calling attention to the complexities that arise in the processes, interactions and encounters with media that confound dichotomous ways of interpreting media objects.

Life After New Media: Mediation as a Vital Process. Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylinska. MIT Press. 2012.

Find this book:



Writing in the *Huffington Post*, work and family researcher Judi Casey [speculates](#) on the well-being of individuals and their family relationships when media technologies like smartphones, laptops and ipods become regular features at the dinner table and the marital bed. While children and couples might share the same physical space, she wonders whether they can interact meaningfully when distracted by the familiar ping of communication devices. Do the benefits of flexibility and connection that new media promise outweigh the negatives? Such anxieties typify daily life for many in the western industrialised world. No doubt many a parent has guilted over soothing a cranky toddler with an iPad, or keeping their partner awake with the incessant beeping of a smartphone well into the night.



The stories we tell about the relationships between humans and their technological objects reveal a familiar narrative, according to [Sarah Kember](#) and [Joanna Zylinska](#) – one where technology is championed as advancing the human race, or demonised as the harbinger of its demise. In their book *Life After New Media: Mediation as a Vital Process*, the authors question the binary thinking that commonly frames debates around new media, and in doing so, propose a new approach to understanding techno-mediated environments and affiliations.

As professors in technology, media and communication at Goldsmiths College in London, Zylinska and Kember, respectively, have amassed a body of critical scholarship that is characterised by an emphasis on the indeterminate and relational aspects of techno-human encounters. In this book, they bring their shared emphasis on the complex transformative and interlocking connections between biological and technological actors to bear on a range of compelling examples and topical events: the Large Hadron Collider project and the UK's 2011 'credit crunch' (chapter 2), artistic practices such as photography (chapter 3), smart homes (chapter 4), advances in facial reconstructive surgery (chapter 5) and ethical issues concerning media and technology like internet privacy and gene modification (chapter 6).

In the case studies that make up the chapters, which are punctuated by the author's own creative outputs (Zylinska is a photographer and Kember a novelist), they question the taken-for-granted assumptions and beliefs about new media both within popular thinking and academic scholarship. For the authors, to even speak of the category 'new' media creates a conceptual dilemma when updated and improved versions of media gadgets are released at a breathtaking rate, prompting the question 'what counts as new?' In disciplinary terms, they attempt to move away from discussions around new media that tend to analyse media objects as discrete entities (TV, the internet) and their impacts in equally isolated terms of 'societies' and 'individuals'.

In their aim to re-orient established perspectives in new media scholarship and open up fresh ways of approaching and understanding media as more than simply objects (phones, computers, kindles) whose effects can be analysed empirically, Kember and Zylinska look to the hybrid process of mediation, which they view as a multiagental and temporal phenomenon that “gives us insight into the liveness, or vitality, of media. By this we mean something more than just the liveness of media...we are referring instead to the possibility of the emergence of forms always new or potentiality to generate unprecedented connections and unexpected events” (p.24). In their terms, therefore, mediation is not an intermediary between two discrete things, as it is commonly characterised, but is an all encompassing process with social, economic, political, technical and psychological aspects that must be accounted for and cannot be disentangled from each other.

In pitching mediation as a vital process, the authors turn to the philosophies of Henri Bergson and Jacques Derrida, whose ideas provide the conceptual scaffolding through which the temporal and spatial dimensions of being and becoming in the techno world are explored. The authors are clear that their project is not intended to be “an exercise in philosophical point scoring” (p.72), preferring instead to see critical theory as a creative and playful tool to break down ontological distinctions such as theory and practice, image and text, production and consumption that pervade media studies scholarship.

These threads are brought together in chapter 7, the final chapter of the book, where Kember and Zylinska reiterate their call for a more dynamic and networked engagement with media that regards ever-changing cultural, political and economic social conditions as integral to, and inseparable from, the media landscapes they help create. Moreover, by embedding their own photography and fiction writing into the book, Zylinska and Kember enact a vision of ‘life after new media’ that embodies their aim to extend media studies beyond traditional forms of analysis toward “the performativity of all theory” (p.202).

This necessary and ambitious project succeeds in convincing us to think differently about new media by taking account of the mediated nature of the biological-technical encounters that characterise new media. It makes a key intervention into the fields of technology, media and communication studies, extending scholarly and popular discussions by calling attention to the complexities that arise in the processes, interactions and encounters with media that confound clear-cut or dichotomous ways of interpreting media objects and effects.

Kim Toffoletti is a senior lecturer in Sociology at Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia. Her research interests include feminist studies of technology, sport and visual culture, and the writings of Jean Baudrillard. She is the author of *Cyborgs and Barbie Dolls: Feminism, Popular Culture and the Posthuman Body* (2007, I.B.Tauris) and *Baudrillard Reframed*. [Read more reviews by Kim](#).